



THE UNDERSEA WELL
JANE CASSIDY



Organized by the **Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts**, Montgomery, Alabama

MONTGOMERY MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

Wynton M. Blount Cultural Park
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EXHIBITION CHECKLIST:

Not all works shown at all venues

- *They Upped Their Game After the Oranges*, 2012, projection mapping and stereo sound, variable dimensions
- *The Undersea Well*, 2017, single channel video, four projectors, and stereo sound, variable dimensions
- *Whereas For Me It Means*, 2014–2018, four-channel surround sound, four speakers, 16 LED lights, and 3D printed casings, variable dimensions
- *Startled By This Silence That Had Never Been Broken*, 2017, stereo sound, video, wooden sculpture, and headphones, 48 x 12 x 12 inches
- *The Closer To Death You Are The More Alive You Feel*, 2018, stereo sound, video, wooden sculpture, and headphones, 48 x 12 x 12 inches





LIGHT, HARMONY, SPACE: JANE CASSIDY'S TRANSFORMATION OF DARKNESS

JENNIFER JANKAUSKAS

Multi-disciplinary artist Jane Cassidy (Irish, born 1984) creates immersive environments that reflect both nature and her homeland of Ireland while engaging the senses. Learning about the history of her country—a history filled with myths and magic—while surrounded by an ever-changing landscape deeply impacted her art. In her pieces, she aims to capture and distill the natural elements that define Ireland: the stark west coast, dramatic lighting that skims over coastal mountains, and the rhythmic and wild sea that surrounds the island. Her art is not only inspired by the natural landscape but also by the cultural environment of her youth. Her experiences growing up watching MTV music videos and participating in the active Irish rave scene also influenced the way she views light and sound and the approach she takes incorporating them into her art.

Each of Cassidy's works aligns with relational aesthetics, which, loosely defined, describes works by artists who create multi-sensory or interactive installations with the aim of forming social contexts that generate connections among the participants.¹ Cassidy states, "In creating a new environment for the viewer I extract the audience from the traditional gallery space. Just as going to a church, looking at the stars, or going for a sea swim can extract our minds from our daily routine, I try to offer a similar moment in my work. By offering visuals and music in a way that alters a particular space, I aim to elevate the viewer's spirit and cognitive engagement within the gallery."² Most of her works create communal settings that evoke curiosity, awe, and wonder.

Cassidy's early work demonstrates the influences of pioneering audio/visual artists such as Norman McLaren (Canadian, born Scotland, 1914–1987), who, beginning in the 1930s, merged animation and sound into synchronized and rhythmic effects; Oskar Fischinger (American, born Germany, 1900–1967), whose meticulously-drawn color abstractions moved in sync with music to become "visual music"; and John Whitney, Sr. (American, 1917–1995), who, as an early master of computer generated art, innovatively and artfully utilized harmonic (chord) progressions in his work. Expanding upon these artists' ideas and creating her own methodology, Cassidy consistently experiments with new techniques and manipulating technologies. She begins with her own musical compositions filled with meditative deep swells, slow pulses, field recordings, and choral vocals and unites them with visuals to create tender moments and soothing spaces. A key concept informing Cassidy's work is synesthesia, a condition wherein sensory experiences are atypically linked. For example, sound becomes perceived as a color.³ While she is not a synesthete, Cassidy attempts to mimic this phenomenon by finding and connecting the symmetries between sound and imagery. She accomplishes this by mapping harmonies with color and shifting patterns of light to sonic rhythms; doing so allows the audio and visuals to coalesce and create a unified whole.

This melding of sound and light is most apparent in *They Upped Their Game After the Oranges*, 2012. Here, Cassidy removed the animation from a flat screen and projected it into a corner, distorting the space through visual trickery. The first half features a cube shape, accompanied by ominous bass tones, pulsing, shifting, and growing outward from the corner and expanding into the room. In the second half, the cube shape morphs into a triangle illuminated with a fabric-like moiré pattern, and in conjunction with the joyous chords in her music, recedes and dissolves into space.

Constructed specifically for this exhibition, the single channel video and sound installation, *The Undersea Well*, 2017, is Cassidy's hymn to the island of Inis Oírr. One of the Aran Islands, it sits off the west coast of Ireland not far from the artist's family home in Galway. Cassidy conceived of this work while an artist-in-residence at the Áras Éanna Arts Centre. Every day the sight and sound of crashing waves from the Atlantic Ocean surrounded her, and this experience became the basis of *The Undersea Well*. As the film progresses—from turbulent to

calm—the magic and mystery of this special place emerges. She states, “The water of Inis Oírr can feel like a rare thing: crystal clear, cold, alive, holy, and precious. I spent so much time with it during my residency that I felt like I was becoming a part of the limestone.”⁴

To capture the images and sound of Inis Oírr, Cassidy traversed the three-square-mile island seeking the favorite spots of the locals along with the fresh streams that run underground. The inhabitants traditionally attribute healing powers to these fresh water sources. Many, including the stream she recorded, are only recognizable by the small, water-tumbled pebbles that lay scattered around the site as the fresh water emerges from beneath the limestone rocks when the tides recede. She filmed the water from above but captured its sound from the surface to a depth of ten feet using an underwater microphone, creating the sensation of being simultaneously above and beneath the water. It is an immersive projection abounding with images of waves, seaweed, and bubbles atop the water’s surface seen through prisms that distort and overlay the film with geometric forms. Cassidy’s recordings of the water combine with a musical score that, at its bassline, keeps tempo with the lapping and crashing waves to gently envelop both the body and mind of the viewer in the movement of the sea.

Water is also at the root of *Whereas For Me It Means*, 2014–2018. Although this piece was originally created in 2014, Cassidy crafted a site-specific version for this exhibition. The original piece signaled a shift in Cassidy’s work: she began moving beyond projection into sculpture. Inspired by Dublin Bay lighthouses, she found that the rhythm of the pulsing light, turning on and off as it guided boats into harbor, embodied an inherent musicality. To simulate this effect in sculptural form she visualized her musical score by running the analog audio signal through LEDs. The music lasts for approximately five and a half minutes and is a dialogue between two chords slowly building and extending to mimic the relaxing rhythms of rising and falling tides. The LED lanterns receive the audio and light up, flickering organically in a visual “conversation,” an exchange that resembles shooting stars or the dance of fireflies on a dark night. Like many of her works, *Whereas For Me It Means* is an attempt to manifest the experience of nature in her art.

The multi-sensory, freestanding sculptures *Startled By This Silence That Had Never Been Broken*, 2017, and *The Closer To Death You Are The More Alive You Feel*, 2018, function as individual experiences: only one person at a time can wear the headphones and look through the lens. No longer reliant on total darkness like her projections, the individual sculptures allow for intimate encounters that are both immersive and expansive. In *Startled By This Silence...* Cassidy composed robust organ chords to evoke the largeness of the universe and paired these chords with images from the Hubble Space Telescope that she animated and digitally stitched together. Hidden within the score is a recording of her parents’ voices, adding a sense of humanity projected into the vastness of space. *The Closer To Death You Are The More Alive You Feel*, 2018, is similar in format, but instead of entering deep space, Cassidy explores the unfathomable sea. Using an impermeable container, she sent her camera into the water and filmed jellyfish examining this foreign object. In both of these pieces the lens bends the light to capture the illusion of depth and space.

In each of her works of art Cassidy assigns weight to light, uses harmony and tone to shape her visuals, and thereby transforms darkness. Inviting us into her meditative spaces, she engulfs us in sound and light to engage all of our senses while offering a glimpse of magic.

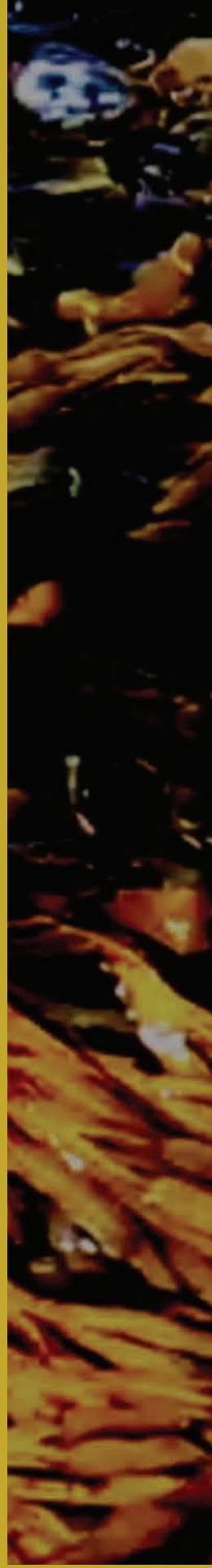
1 Relational Aesthetics is a theory formulated by French curator and critic, Nicolas Bourriaud, in the 1990s.

2 Jane Cassidy, correspondence with author, May 29, 2018.

3 *Cambridge Dictionary Online*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/synaesthesia>. Accessed May 17, 2018.

4 Jane Cassidy, “The Craic Is Always Mighty On Inis Oírr,” *The Inisheer Zibaldone*, October 18, 2017,

<https://inisheerzibaldone.wordpress.com/2017/10/18/the-craic-is-always-mighty-on-inis-oirr-by-jane-cassidy/>. Accessed April 20, 2018.







THANK YOU

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Jane Cassidy



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